



Response to "America's Flawed Afghanistan Strategy"

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Update: Steve Metz responds.

Dr. Metz discusses many aspects of the Global War on Terror in his August 2010 SSI Newsletter Op-Ed, but intertwines subjects, such as the Taliban and al Qaeda, without putting the subjects in the proper perspective.

He wrote, “Both the Bush and Obama strategies assume al Qaeda needs state support or sanctuary” accompanied by an opinion that al Qaeda does not require state support or sanctuary. Second, al Qaeda and the Taliban have very different objectives and only work together as necessary to facilitate their organization’s goal. He fails to clearly distinguish these entities in making his argument. Third, he obscures these significant differences (goals) by writing concurrently about both groups and implies that al Qaeda is a player in the Afghanistan struggle. Finally, he wrote, “Simply funding the Afghan government and providing it with training and advice can prevent an outright Taliban victory without a large U.S. military presence.” This view is naïve and has been proven wrong.

Regarding the first issue, al Qaeda’s requirement for state support and sanctuary has been proven to be a strategic and operational requirement. The existence of camps in Pakistan, the North-West Frontier Province and South Waziristan, the latter a semi-autonomous region and home to scores of al Qaida and Taliban fighters, indicate that there is state support either complicit or implicit. In fact, the destruction of various “sanctuaries” has significantly degraded al Qaeda’s

capabilities as evidenced by the lack of attacks in the U.S. and al Qaeda's recent plea/begging for money. So there is plenty of evidence al Qaeda is crippled and eradicating training facilities has not only caused behavioral change but has also affected the command and control of al Qaeda's leadership and the organization's capabilities. Also, writing that al Qaeda was able to plot terrorism[1] from Afghanistan because the U.S. was unaware of the impending danger is false. The Clinton administration targeted Osama bin Laden on numerous occasions prior to September 11, 2001, and even deployed cruise missiles against al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan in 1998.

Taliban and al Qaeda have very different objectives, the former's regional goal, with no current strategic goal, is to return to power in Afghanistan and install their derivative of the Taliban belief system. The latter has strategic goals including the overthrow of the U.S. and the expansion of Islam throughout the world. These two cancers only coordinate and synchronize efforts when it furthers their group's goals.

Dr. Metz does not clearly articulate the influence that the Taliban belief system has in Afghanistan when he writes, "The Taliban came to power in 1996 because the warlords opposing it had little outside support and more importantly, because Afghans did not understand just what [Mullah Omar's version of] the Taliban rule would mean. Now they do and will resist, at least outside Afghan Pashtun areas."

The Pashtun population accounts for about 42% of the population[2] with Tajik a distant second at 27%, clearly a controlling minority/majority. By adding the caveat, "at least outside Afghan Pashtun areas" he significantly reduces the impact of his statement. With the second largest majority at 27% not embracing the Taliban belief system, of course they are not inclined to support it. Pashtun's embrace the Taliban belief system, but to varying degrees. For example, many Pashtun's support and practice the Taliban belief system, but do not support the use of the belief system for terrorism or violence and are often referred to as "little T" among ISAF personnel. Big "T" refers to people who believe in the Taliban belief system and use it as a tool for control, violence, and terrorism. The reason that the Taliban had success in the mid 1990's is because Mullah Omar hid his agenda from the Pashtun's and others and he fooled the warlords into not opposing his intervention in Afghanistan. Further, the Afghanistan army/government valiantly opposed the incursion into their country, but was defeated. So with 42% of the population involved in the Taliban belief system, it is likely that the belief system will remain strong in Afghanistan. The question is, "Will the Pashtun leaders forgo the terrorist bent that has infected the Taliban belief system?"

